

Sermon for Holy Communion on the Third Sunday of Advent, 16th December 2018

Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18 - Vipers?

For the readings, see <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=411967662>

‘You brood of vipers!’ said John the Baptist. You’re all damned, unless you repent and change your life. Oh dear. Actually I’m not going to give you a work-out from John the Baptist’s play-book this morning - partly because I covered the same ground last week, about living each day as if it is going to be your last; sharing your food and clothes with people in need; and if you are in a position of power or authority, as a soldier or as a tax inspector, not exploiting your power to bully people.

I’m not even going to try to bring the shenanigans over Brexit in this last week into my message, although there is a temptation to see some of the politicians involved as a brood of vipers. It is so sad that this business has been so divisive. This week I read that the Dean of Southwark has made a prayer, which I’ll come back to, to ask for God’s help in healing the divisions and bringing wisdom to the conundrums.

Instead, even though this is still the season of Advent, and there are definite challenges to repent still undoubtedly facing us, it is Rose Sunday today, with a pink candle - the Sunday when we can look up joyfully and sing ‘Rejoice! The Lord is king.’ Robert had a lot of nice Advent hymns to choose from today, but that splendid Charles Wesley one, ‘Rejoice! The Lord is king’, has had to wait on the bench this time. It’s hymn number 563 if you want to look it up. It’s a great hymn. It is based on our epistle, our letter, Paul’s letter to the early church at Philippi, whom he was very fond of. ‘Rejoice, again I say, rejoice’.

If you follow the story of St Paul’s three missionary journeys in the book of the Acts of the Apostles - and this bit is in chapter 16 of Acts - you will read about his visit to the important Macedonian city of Philippi, founded by Philip the Great in 348BC, which was a Roman colony by the time Paul went there in about 50AD. Philippi was where there was Lydia, who was the first European to be converted to Christianity, Lydia, the woman who had a business dealing in purple cloth, who invited Paul and his companions, probably Luke, Silas and Timothy, to stay with her. Her house became the first Christian church - the first ‘house church’ - in Europe.

Then after Paul and Silas were arrested and thrown into jail in Philippi, and the jail was broken open by an earthquake, the jailer was so grateful, because they did not run off and escape, that he and his household asked to be baptised and become Christians too. After Paul had let on that he and Silas were Roman citizens, which meant that it was not lawful for them to have been whipped and thrown into jail in the first place, the magistrates came and apologised to them and they were allowed to go free. Philippi was truly a happy place for St Paul.

But when Paul wrote his letter, his Epistle, to his friends in Philippi, he was again in prison - most probably in Rome. In this short letter - only four chapters - there is some memorable teaching by St Paul. Is it better to die, and go to heaven, or to survive and preach another day? He is 'torn two ways' [Phil.1:23].

And there's also this famous passage: that Jesus humbled himself, and made himself nothing: but 'God raised him to the heights and bestowed on him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and ... every tongue confess him Lord of all' [Phil. 2:6f]. This is a real echo of the gospel theme, Jesus' rather contrarian teaching that 'the first shall be last'. It reminds me also of the revolutionary lines of the Magnificat: 'He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and exalted the humble and meek.' It's upside-down. Upside-down Jesus Christ.

Perhaps another reason why St Paul was so warm towards the Philippians was that, as he thanks them for doing, they sent him two lots of contributions towards his expenses, when he was at Thessalonica. None of the other early churches had done this. He mentions it, and he praises the Philippians, right at the end of his letter.

In our passage today, Paul forecasts (because his letters were written before the Gospels), or rather he parallels the message that we'll find in the Gospels, teaching by Jesus about not being too concerned with material things. According to St Matthew, Jesus said, 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they toil not, neither do they spin; [but] ... Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these' (Matt. 6:28-29). Paul wrote very much in the same vein, 'Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.'

So what shall our prayer be? In this time it is truly difficult not to worry, difficult not to feel animosity against people who, you might well feel, are threatening our cosmopolitan way of life and our comfortable standard of living - and you may well feel that, whichever side you are on. So this is what the Dean of Southwark has written, the prayer that he suggests we might use. Let us pray.

God of reconciling hope,
as you guided your people in the past
guide us through the turmoil of the present time
and bring us to that place of flourishing
where our unity can be restored,
the common good served
and all shall be made well.
In the name of Jesus we pray.
Amen.

Amen. So be it.

Hugh Bryant